DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 375 397 CS 214 518

AUTHOR Cushman, Mary Ellen
TITLE Praxis and Ethnography: Empowering Urban, African-American Women through an Expanded Model of Participant Observation.
PUB DATE 16 Jul 94
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Penn State Conference on Rhetoric and Composition (13th, University Park, PA, July 13-16, 1994).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Black Community; *Blacks; Ethnography; *Females; *Literacy; *Participant Observation; Participatory Research; *Rhetoric; Rhetorical Theory
IDENTIFIERS *African Americans; Composition Theory; *Empowerment; Literacy as a Social Process; Researcher Role

ABSTRACT

A year-and-a-half of ethnographic fieldwork in a primarily African-American neighborhood suggests that praxis and ethnographic methods can be stirred together to produce empowering literacy artifacts and discourse in the community. Originally a Marxist notion, praxis requires researchers to understand how people characterize their own situations within larger social and political contexts. In the present context, it also asks the researcher to put something back into the community he or she studies. Embarking on a study that asks, "How do African-Americans use language and literacy to navigate the institutional settings with which they come into contact?" one researcher found that she could help to empower the people she worked with. As an ethnographer, emowerment meant: (1) enabling people to achieve a goal by providing resources for them; (2) facilitating actions--particularly those associated with language and literacy; and (3) lending the researcher's power or status to forward people's achievement. Academics who often take quiet space and time for granted can help to offer such space to the objects of their study, many of whom may not normally have such luxuries. They can also simplify access to the university and its services. And they can serve as character references; that is, they can use their status to further the goals of the people they work with. (Contains 26 references.) (TB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 375 397

Praxis and Ethnography: Empowering Urban, African-American Women through an Expanded Model of Participant Observation

A Presentation for the
Penn. State Conference
on Rhetoric and Composition
July 16, 1994

Draft: Please do not cite or quote without permission. Thanks.

Mary Ellen Cushman
Department of L L & C
Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute
Troy, NY 12180
(518) 276-6469
e-mail: Cushmm@rpi.edu

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
M. E. Cushman
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC).

CS214518

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Rhetoricians, including Halloran (1982) , Schiappa (1994), Crowley (1990), and Jamieson (1988), have called for an expansion of the current scholarly and daily practices of rhetoricians. Informing their arguments with historical references to more civically minded rhetoricians, modern scholars encourage us to contribute to public forums of discourse in our communities. I'd like to take their calls to participation one step further and ask not only how rhetoricians can reclaim that part of history where we were actively involved in the community, but also ask how we can empower the people in our communities by participating in their discourse. This participation could take the form of praxis. Originally a Marxist notion, praxis requires researchers to understand how people characterize their own situations within larger social and political contexts. Once researchers recognize the collective consciousness, resources and strategies already in place in the setting, they're in a better position to meld action and theory in ways that facilitate the efforts of people to critique and alter their social situation.

This extension of our work to include empowering action in the community correlates to discussions of praxis taking place in other disciplines. Various schools of thought have adopted notions of praxis to inform their methodologies. For example, feminist social scientists, such as Ann Oakley (1981), Patti Lather (1991), Carol Lehmann (1991), Carol Glassman (1992), Liz Stanley and Sue Wise (1990) explore ideas of praxis; applied anthropologists, such as Wayne Warry (1992) and Agneta Johannsen (1992), consider theories of praxis as they apply to social change at the institutional level; further, scholarship concerned with educational practices provides useful models of research where, even though the agendas aren't overtly political, the method of participant observation is expanded to produce change. Briefly, the models proposed by Moll and Diaz (1987), Michael Apple (1983), S.B. Heath (1980), Jabari Mahari (1991), Mike Rose (1989) and Luis Moll (1992), all reveal the ways in which researchers and rhetoricians can begin to reclaim our history of community involvement, with the goal of producing theories informed by the people about whom we theorize.

I've found through a year-and-a-half of ethnographic fieldwork in a primarily African-American neighborhood that praxis and ethnographic methods can indeed be stirred together in order to produce empowering literacy artifacts and discourse in the community. When we enter into the public forum, we can offer our intellectual and social resources to people in the community. As academics, we struggle with the hypocrisy of maintaining our livelihood from the institutional power structures we often criticize. Some respond to this double bind with flaming, ideologically loaded arguments or handshakes with despair. Yet, despite the insular politics of the academy, its power structure also invests us with privilege and status. And we in a conscious way need to use this power to help others. In this presentation, I'd like to offer a working model of how we can expand participant observation to include praxis in order to empower people with language and literacy. Let me begin with a brief description of my study

and a definition of empowerment. I'll then move on to reveal how this definition plays itself out in my research.

18 months ago, I embarked on this study with one central question: "How do these people use language and literacy to navigate the institutional settings with which they come in contact?" I gained access to this neighborhood via a community center as a literacy volunteer and soon became close to a number of the families on the block. The data I collect is conventional: taped conversations, literacy artifacts and participant observation fieldnotes comprise the bulk of the it. Even though all of this data will eventually help me write my dissertation, my work can't stop here because one of the primary components of praxis is reciprocity. The idea of reciprocity is developed by both Friere (1971) and Bourdieu (1990) and is the foundation for expanding participant observation to include empowerment. To empower, as I use it, means:

a) to enable someone to achieve a goal by providing resources for them;

b) to facilitate actions--particularly those associated with language and literacy;

c) to lend our power or status to forward people's achievement;

I should also make clear that the type of literacy I refer to in this paper is the literacy devoted to improvement of the self, be it intellectual, emotional, spiritual, or psychological. "Literacy for yourself," as it's often categorized by the people in this neighborhood, resembles Brian Street's "ideological" model of literacy forms (1984), Geisler's account of "indigenous" forms of literacy (1994), as well as Anne Ruggles Gere version of "extracurricular" literate activities (1994). One important part of this literacy is the social and material complications behind its production.

The Luxury of Literacy: Resources

Since we're surrounded with the tools for literacy all day long, we often take for granted the luxury of the time and space needed for our literacy events. We schedule our work days around papers we read and write; our research is often carried out in libraries--clean, well lit, with cubicles and desks to use as we silently mine books for information; and we return to our homes or offices to trace out an idea with pen and paper or at the keyboard. Our time is devoted to reading and writing with spaces and institutional resources often provided for us.

But the reading and writing used for individual development in this neighborhood is a valued, scarce, and difficult endeavor. Valued because time to sit alone, without the kids, without the phone or TV, without visitors is so hard to schedule. Before time for oneself can be legitimately cleared, more important time consuming responsibilities must be handled, such as dealing with social workers, teachers, doctors, counselors, and welfare (where one scheduled visit usually takes the better part of the morning). The house has to be cleaned, clothes washed and mended, grandparents and babies looked after, and food bought and prepared. We may say to ourselves that reading and writing is more important than some of these daily worries, but one of the primary ways women

in this neighborhood garner status for themselves is to be good mothers, providers, doers. All of their social and family duties must be in place before someone can legitimately take time to read and write for themselves.[1] Many of these women say they "wish there was more than 24 hours in a day," or they qualify their literate goals with "if I had time, I could study that driver's manual." But even when they have the time, they often don't have a private, quiet space in which to read and write.

Quiet space is a scarce resource in this neighborhood where most people receive some form of public assistance. The refurbished houses provide 3-4 bedroom apartments, but for families like the Cadens, with 3 single mothers, 4 young adults, and 3 babies, space alone is indeed rare to clear and maintain. But quiet individual space is necessary for 2 reasons: 1. some of the older people in the family need to read aloud in order to understand, but they feel awkward doing so in front of their kids and other family members, and 2. some of the teenagers believe that reading in front of others stigmatizes them as "smart' and "above the others." They don't want to be termed "higher ups," so they choose not to read unless they know they won't "be found out." However, these teens will openly write short stories, letters to God, raps, poetry, and personal journals because writing doesn't have the same stigma as reading. Lucy Cadens, the most important provider for this family, believes that her teens might be more willing to "write in front of others because you can still keep it to yourself. But for reading, you hold that book up, and everyone knows what you reading." Thus, while reading requires both time and space resources for both the teens and elders, writing only requires time. Unfortunately, both time and private, quiet space are fairly rare resources. While these observations are useful in discovering the complexities surrounding the literacy in this neighborhood, ethnographic praxis asks us to lend ourselves to others after we identify a barrier to their achievement. Seeing the need for time and space is only half of the equation, then: the other half is doing something about those needs.

Empowering people in part enables them to achieve a goal by providing resources for them. Since it's difficult for many of these women to clear time and space alone while they're at home, we often schedule one or two hours to be together during the week when they know they won't be missed, and we go to quiet, comfortable places where we read and write together. I've found that reserving a study room at RPI's library, using RPI's Writing Center, or going to my apartment gives us the time and space where we can read aloud and talk about what we've read. I've also invited these women to unofficially attend the expository writing classes I taught last year. In these times and spaces, we've

---

1 Mike Rose reminds us in Lives on the Boundary as he describes a returning student and single mother--Lucia-- "how many pieces had to fall in place each day for her to be a student... Only if those pieces dropped in smooth alignment could her full attention shift to" the challenges of literacy for her own development (185). Carol Stack in All Our Kin also describes similar domestic demands which must take priority over time for oneself in order for a person to maintain the social networks of reciprocity . In other words, before the women in this neighborhood can devote their time to reading and writing to improve themselves, they have to have so much of their lives in place.

studied driver's manuals, gone through the college application process, and worked on papers and letters they wanted to write. These literacy events were facilitated with time away from the neighborhood and a space where people feel at ease to read, talk, and write. I've found that the luxury of literacy can easily be transferred from the university to our neighborhoods when we expand the participant side of our research to include praxis.

Education is an Invitation: Access

Along side providing a few of the luxuries of literacy, ethnographers working under theories of praxis can also simplify access to the university. While situated within the rigors of university life, we tend to forget the isolation of universities from communities. This prompts Michael Halloran to write: "the efforts of citizens to shape the fate of their community... would surely have been of interest to American neo-classical rhetoricians of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries" (2). Unfortunately, he sees an "apparent lack of interest in such 'Public Discourse' among new rhetoricians of late twentieth-century English departments" (2). But the knife of disenchantment cuts both ways as people from communities often shun schooling institutions. John Ogbu's work as a researcher in education leads him to the conclusions that some African-Americans' "mistrust of schools arises partly from Black perceptions of the past and current discriminatory treatment by public schools" (238). One role ethnographers can adopt is to extend the invitation to education by assisting people's actions.[2] For example, I originally gained access into this neighborhood as a literacy volunteer and program coordinator out of a community center. I put together a summer program where six children on the block researched issues important to them. Along with three teenage mentors, these kids were invited to the public library, Rensselaer and Russell Sage libraries, and to Rensselaer computer labs. Here's an excerpt that was written by a nine-year-old boy, Jonathan, after I helped along his use of these facilities:

> To be a black man you have to be everything that a black man has to be.... He has to be strong... so that he doesn't get beat up by other black men.... And a black man has to go to college. Why? So he can get an education and he doesn't be stupid.... Even though I'm depressed about being a black man, I still hope to be strong. I will be nice to my wife and kids while I'm being a black man. You have to have confidence in yourself while you're being a black man. You have to be strong while you're being a black man.

Jonathan creates an identity for himself based on the books he read, his own observations, and his talks with other people on the block. Yet, without an invitation and a facilitated route into these institutions, Jonathan may not have written this self- creating piece. This is particularly true at RPI where private property signs are posted on the doors of all the buildings--these signs tell people that only Rensselaer faculty, staff, students and their invited guests are allowed. So far, I've revealed how we can lend ourselves to people to advance their

[2] Bill Moyer quotes Rose on the possibility of education being an ivitation as opposed to a mothering and erasing experience.

achievement and facilitate their actions when we expand participant observation to include praxis. Let me turn to one other aspect of ethnographic praxis: how we can make ourselves useful to others by supporting their actions with our social status.

The Transfer of Status: Legitimacy

As professors and graduate students, we often loose sight of the amount of social status we carry merely from the title of our positions and the institutions where we work. We often hear talk of the *oppression* of the academy, or the *plight* of our academic lives, or as Lynn Bloom put it, being raped by English departments. These power struggles have merit in the context of the university where it's well known how little status and prestige composition teachers and rhetoricians garner. Yet, viewed from the perspective of people outside of the university, the status we carry manifests itself in significant and useful ways. We can aid the people we study by encouraging them to manipulate the prestige of our titles when they need to expedite their actions.

For example, I've been listed as a reference when women look for new apartments. The reasons for this are complicated and telling. In Troy, there are three routes to finding a new place to live: Troy Housing Authority (THA), which maintains the projects; Troy Rehabilitation and Improvement Program (TRIP), which refurbished abandoned houses and rents them to large families; and private landlords, most of whom are white males. Many of the women in this neighborhood rent from TRIP, but when they're evicted from their TRIP homes, the stigma usually follows them to THA because the agencies often run in tandem together. As Lucy Cadens says, "they scratch each other's back. TRIP, THA, and Section 8 are all connected together through HUD. It's a little clique." This means an information network exists between these renting agencies where the histories of people are passed along. To complicate matters, these women also have a difficult time renting with private landlords. They can't get descent references from the people at TRIP; the landlords typically don't accept public assistance; and/or the landlords have set their rental prices too high for public assistance to meet. If the woman has a good reference from TRIP, and the landlord accepts public assistance, but the rent's high, this sends women back Section 8, part of HUD funding. Thus, the cycle repeats itself because, in the words of Cadens again, "HUD funding is only given to those people who are in good graces with TRIP, THA, and Sandy Naples, who divvies up Section 8."

As a result of this complicated rental process, women have included me on their lists of references for rental applications because they recognize the sociological value of my position. They try to grease the mechanisms of the system with my prestige. Often I'm asked to come along on the apartment search because as one woman put it: "having you there is going to make the landlord think I'm respectable, you being from RPI and all." This woman realizes the social value of my being an RPI graduate student and my being white. She used my status as a stepping stone to her ends.

In another example of ethnographic praxis where someone forwards her own agendas by borrowing the prestige of my position, Lucy asked me to serve as a character witness in a custody case. She had been helping out a teen with her

baby because the teen didn't seem ready to assume responsibility for the child. After a number of months with the child, Lucy sued for custody in order to be in a better position to take care of the child's medical and personal needs. I not only went to court with Lucy, but I also wrote a letter to the court stating her qualifications as a mother. The letter was written on RPI letterhead and signed with my title under my name. Lucy indeed got custody of the child and thanked me for what she saw as my contribution to the process. She understood that the court values the status of a PhD student and the status of being from RPI. My job as a researcher who's interested in expanding models of participant observation, not only demands that I honor her insightful perception of my status, but that I simplify the route to her goals with this status as well.

To sum, these are just a few of the ways in which ethnographic praxis can help people. The facets of the model of empowerment which I wasn't able to address here include notions of reciprocity, solidarity, and dialogue, as Bourdieu and Freire term them. The redefinition of participant observation that I've outlined here lends itself to theory building informed by the complex and rich, daily practices of people outside of the academy. And for Patti Lather, this type of theory building is what research as praxis is all about: "theory adequate to the task of changing the world must be open-ended, non-dogmatic, informing and grounded in the circumstances of everyday life" (264). When we base social theories in actual daily practices, we not only better align people's actions to our descriptions of them, but we also abstain from applying our theories from the sociological top down. With ethnographic praxis then, theories can't be reduced to a few maxims of the academy's pet analytical constructs that are then prescribed to the community. Instead, we theorize--not to promote ourselves under the auspices of our colleagues--but to serve the people about and with whom we construct knowledge. With an expanded model of ethnographic methods, we're in a better position to build the types of theories which could lead to social change, primarily because they're based on participation in daily community activities.

But the goals and benefits of ethnographic praxis are more than just at the theoretical level. Wayne Warry says it this way: "emancipatory praxis is a specific type of moral and political activity aimed at the liberation of individuals or communities from the alienating aspects of everyday practice" (158). And for rhetoricians, where our history stems from moral and political activities within the community, this notion of uniting ethnography and praxis may be one way we can re-enter into the public discourse of our communities.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Apple, M. "Curricular Form and the Logic of Technical Control." *Ideology and Practice in Schooling*. Eds. M. Apple and L. Weis. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1983. 143-167.

Bloom, Lynn. "Teaching College English as a Woman." *College English*. 54.7 (Nov. 1992):818-826.

Bourdieu, P. The Logic of Practice. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1990.

Crowley, S. *The Methodical Memory: Invention in Current-Traditional Rhetoric*. Urbana: So. Illinois UP, 1990.

Freire, Paolo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. . New York: Herder & Herder, 1971.

Halloran, Michael. Afterword. "Rhetoric in the American College Curriculum: The Decline of Public Discourse." *PreText* 3 (1982): 245-69.

Geisler, C. "Literacy Among Novices in the Academy: Students in School." Academic Literacy and the Nature of Expertise. Boston: Erlbaum, 1994.

Glassman, C. "Feminist Dilemas in Practice." *Affilia*. 7 (1992):160-6.

Heath, SB. *Ways With Words*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983.

Jamieson, K.H. *Eloquence in the Electronic Age*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988.

Johannsen, Agneta. "Applied Anthropology and Post-Modernist Ethnography." *Human Organization*. 51.1 (Spring 1992): 71-81

Lather, Patti. *Getting Smart: Feminist research and Pedagogy with(in) the Postmodern*. London: Routledge, 1991.

---. "Research as Praxis." Harvard Ed. Rev. 56.3 (1986): 257-77.

Lehmann, C. "Grass Roots Programs: Bread or Roses?" *Resources for Feminist Research*. 20.3 (1991): 140-41.

Mahiri, Jabari. "Dicourse in Sports: Langauge and Literacy Features of Preadolescent African-American Males in a Youth Basketball Program." *Journal of Negro Eucation*. 60.3 (1991): 305-313.

Moll, L. "Literacy Research in Community and Classrooms: A Sociocultual Approach." *Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Literacy Research*. Eds. R. Beach et.al. Urbana:NCRE, 1992. 211-244.

Moll, L. and Stephen Diaz. "Change as the Goal of Educational Research." *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*. 18.4 (Dec. 1987): 300-311.

Moyers, Bill. *A World of Ideas 2*. New York: Doubleday, 1990. 218-226.

Oakley, A. "Interviewing Women: A Contradiction in Terms." *Doing Feminist Research*. London: Routledge, 1981. 30-62.

Ogbu, J. "Literacy and Schooling in Subordiante Cultures: The Case of Black Americans." *Perspective on Literacy* . Eds. Kingten, E., Kroll, B. & Rose, M. Urbana: So. Il UP, 1987. 227-42.

Rose, Mike. *Lives on the Boundary*. Boston: Penguin, 1989.

Schiappa, Edward. "Intellectuals and the Place of Cultural Critique." RSA Convention. Norfolk, 15 May 1994.

Stack, C. All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community. New York: Harper, 1974.

Stanley, L. & S. Wise. "Method, Methodology, and Epistemology in Feminist Research Process." *Feminist Praxis*. London: Routledge, 1990. 20-47.

Street, Brian. Literacy in Theory and Practice. London: Cambridge UP, 1984.

Warry, Wayne."The Eleventh Thesis: Applied Anthropology as Praxis." Human Organization 51.2 (1992): 155-63.